

Enjoying the Great North Woods

By

Stephen L. Priest

Introduction

A paddling tour of the 170-mile Androscoggin River with shuttles and leaders provided. And there are no fees! Hard to believe, but the New Hampshire Union Leader outdoor calendar was certainly worth further inquiry.

The Androscoggin River Source to the Sea paddling Trek begins near the Lake Umbagog outlet in the Great North Woods of New Hampshire, and ends in the Atlantic Ocean at Fort Popham, Maine. Trek participants can join the moving river celebration as a day trip, do a series of days, or paddle the entire 20 days.

Computer access to the Androscoggin River Watershed Council (ARWC) web site¹ confirmed this was truly an opportunity to enjoy rustic wilderness up close and personal, while having the thrill of kayaking in northern New England. An added benefit would be learning the culture and history of the area through the eyes of those living there.

The ARWC web site told of celebrating and promoting the improved cleanliness of the Androscoggin River through a series of twenty day trips on the River. I had never paddled the Androscoggin River, nor did I know much about the history of the Great North Woods. The ARWC was providing an opportunity for me to never say, "I wish I had paddled and learned more about northern New Hampshire and Maine."

The Androscoggin River is formed on the Maine-New Hampshire border by the meeting of the Magalloway River and a short outlet of Lake Umbagog. The River flows generally south for some 35 miles through New Hampshire, then turns eastward, enters Maine a few miles east of Gorham, and meanders along a southeasterly course joining the Kennebec River in an inlet of the Atlantic called Merrymetting Bay. Androscoggin is derived from the name of an Indian tribe that lived on the banks of the river. The word Androscoggin is an Indian term meaning, "fishing place for alewives" or "spear fishing."²

When the Trek first started nine years ago, it was nearly 100% canoes. Paddlers are now split 50-50 between canoes and kayaks.

Preparation

My friend Dick Satter and I have chosen the option of spreading our Androscoggin trip over several years, and this year we were to encounter our first taste of Androscoggin whitewater.

Dick was extremely nervous about kayaking in white water, as he had only flat-water experience. The web site's description of Day 2 was to be of particular concern to him. Dick sent numerous e-mails to the Watershed Council asking whether a person of his limited kayaking experience could handle Class II rapids. Each time he received 100% positive encouragement, and yet he kept questioning his skill level to handle the Day 2 trek.

¹ <http://www.androscogginriver.org/>

² <http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/a9/androscoggin.htm>

Initially I was very positive about his ability to handle Class II rapids, but the more he expressed concern, the more I felt maybe I was getting him into something he could not handle. More about Dick's white water experience later.

Camping

Uncertain as to where to stay in northern New Hampshire, and this being an outdoor adventure, we absolutely needed to tent out. We chose Mollidgewock State Park in Errol, New Hampshire. The Park lies along the shore of the Androskoggin River. We registered online at the Mollidgewock State Park web site³.

Our campsite was perfect. We were 10 feet away from the Androskoggin River.

Our campsite location was the favorite morning spot for a loon to make its wakeup call. Between 5:30 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. each day a loon would be within a few feet of the bank producing its mournful ear-piercing cry. We joked that it was our daily alarm clock.

Loons are pretty abundant on the Androskoggin. They are a beautiful bird to see, and to hear their unique "loon call" is a marvel. If you have an interest in hearing the four primary loon calls, you can go to The Loons Nest⁴ and click on the **Loon Calls** link.

Day 1 – 10 miles starting at Magalloway River and ending at Errol Dam

Dick and I arrived at 8:15 a.m. for the scheduled 9 a.m. gathering on the shore of the Magalloway River, located about 8 miles north of Errol, on Route 16. This was also the headquarters of the Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge.

Chuck Knox, Executive Director of the Androskoggin River Watershed Council (ARWC) called the group together to begin the first day of the 2004 Androskoggin Trek to the Sea. Chuck emphasized the mission of the Androskoggin Watershed Council is to improve environmental quality and promote healthy and prosperous communities in the Androskoggin River Watershed area. He gave a brief introduction to the history of the Trek and its purpose to celebrate the revitalization of the formerly polluted Androskoggin River waterway.

³ <http://www.nhstateparks.org/ParksPages/Mollidgewock/Mollidgewock.html>

⁴ www.theloonsnest.biz

Barbara Barrett, ARWC Trek Coordinator, displayed a map and pointed out the specific watershed areas that drain water into the Androscoggin River. She emphasized a large area consisting of mountains and streams as far away as 100 miles that feed into this major New England river.



Figure 1: Barbara pointing out Androscoggin Watershed area. Map held by Chuck Knox

Barbara introduced the Umbagog National Refuge Manager, Paul Casey. Paul explained the Lake Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge is a unique place in the Northern New Hampshire area ideal for viewing a wide variety of wildlife. Lake Umbagog is the 2nd largest lake in New Hampshire, and it is the largest wildlife refuge in the state. Part of the refuge extends into Maine, making its waters an inter-state lake.⁵

Shortly after 10 a.m. with an overcast sky, and near 60-degree temperature, our expedition of 30 paddlers enters the Magalloway River heading for the western side of Lake Umbagog. We begin our Trek to the Sea.

We were on the water for only a few minutes when we saw an osprey fly overhead carrying a large fish in its talons. A huge fish suddenly jumped out of the water attempting to catch a large dragonfly hovering over the water. Our Trek had just begun and here we were amidst the wilderness splendor of northern New Hampshire.

We spotted nesting loons with two chicks, and heeding our earlier warning from Paul Casey to be wary of loons while they have young, we stayed away to not upset them by getting too close. I guess the loons didn't pay attention to Paul because the pair swam right toward us.

⁵ <http://wildlifewatcher.com/ne/umbagog.phtml>

Throughout the day, Dick was questioning, those who would listen, about his kayaking skills for Day 2. It was obvious to me Dick's mind was occupied with his concern about his ability to handle the next day's whitewater.

Paddling Skill Levels

An obvious question before one embarks on a river-paddling trip is, "what paddling skill level and experience does it require? Is there white water, and if so, what class?" All levels of experience are welcome on the Trek, but there are a few days where paddling experience in moving water is strongly recommended. Dick had checked the schedule and saw that day 2 was a Class II whitewater day.

First let's define Class II whitewater⁶. Class II generally means you may get splashed. The waves may reach 3 to 4 feet in height with easy to see obstacles ahead. Class II does require some skill level for avoiding rocks, navigating river bends, missing sunken logs and other visible obstacles.

Months before the July 5th start date, Dick e-mailed Barbara, the trip coordinator, who knew him from our previous year's Trek, and asked her if the first three days had whitewater, and if so, did she think he could handle it. She responded in the positive that only Day 2 had white water, and she thought her remembrance of Dick's kayaking skills would be sufficient to handle this section of the River. In any case, he could portage any area in which he did not feel comfortable.

When we saw Barbara on Day 1 the Dick's first comment to her was, "Do you think I can do Class II for Day 2?"

"Dick," she said, "After the end of today's Trek, there is a section of Class II whitewater below Errol Dam that is a bit tougher than tomorrow, but should be within your skill level. If you can handle these rapids, you can handle any Day 2 rapids. Why not try it after today's Trek?"

And so, at the end of our Day 1 Trek, Dick and I went to look at the rapids below Errol Dam. As we approached the rapids we saw two kayakers downstream exiting from the rapids where they had been training. Dick immediately hurried over to these strangers asking whether this section was passable by someone with limited white water experience. They expressed reservation. This was not looking good for Dick.

This section of the River was at least 30 yards wide with plenty of white water brewing and spraying from both hidden and exposed boulders. It is here the river takes on a new level of excitement as it plunges over twenty feet in less than a hundred yards before transforming into a quiet flow.

I scouted the rapids, and decided on a line through the turbulence just to the right off center of the river.

I was a bit nervous myself, as this section of the river was completely unknown to me. I have done some Class II and III kayaking before⁷, but most of my white water experience was in a canoe, so I was trying to maintain a confident appearance for Dick, while inside I was tense and

⁶ <http://www.wildwater.com/rapids/>

⁷ "East Branch of the Penobscot – Canoeing and Kayaking Challenging and Spectacular Rapids" - Published March 15, 2004 in *Messing About in Boats*.

kept repeating my own advice, “keep it pointed downstream.” Dick now had me questioning my own skills.

I stressed to Dick that, “One learns to read the river by doing it.” You begin on low rapids and learn the water turbulence that occurs when water flows between two obstructions, or when water flows over a flat rock. You develop a “feel” or “instinct” to where to go. You plan two or three turns ahead, even though you are not ready to execute them. It is like the game of Chess where you need to develop two or three moves ahead, even though your immediate move is at hand. So too it is with kayaking a river. It was now time for Dick to get this experience.

Dick’s nervousness was getting me concerned. Was I was pushing him into something he was not capable of handling? I eyed the river for an escape point to observe Dick’s trek in case Dick got stuck, overturned, or had other complications needing my assistance.

I helped Dick into his kayak, guided him into water of depth, and away he went! I was knee deep in water with excitement and nervousness. What was I committing my friend to?



Figure 2: Dick in his inaugural Class 2 whitewater trial

Dick “expertly” made his way around the rocks and into the “vees”. I strained to see him from my river edge perch, and when he was out of sight, I ran to the escape point. Dick had already gone by, and I could not see him because of the slight river turn. I hustled back to the pathway to the agreed upon pullout.

There was Dick, triumphantly holding the paddle over his head! I yelled with delight, “You are now ready for tomorrow!”



Figure 3: A successful Class II Rapid run!

Day 2 - 11.5 miles from Errol through the 13 Mile Woods

The Trek schedule noted Day 2 as “suitable for experienced paddlers only.” These 11.5 miles would contain four or five sections of Class II whitewater. Hence only 15 or so folks were at the Errol Dam meeting place. The group was composed of some of the previous day’s paddlers, plus a few new folks.

We got to our first set of rapids. By definition they appeared to be Class II.

As planned, Dick followed me into the rapids. I maneuvered around protruding rocks, as well as submerged rocks lying just under the water. I would periodically turn my head to make sure Dick was behind me, and to see if I was needed in case of his rescue from a rock, or worst case, he overturned.

Dick looked focused but cool as a cucumber. This first set of rapids was a few hundred yards in length, with obvious obstructions and turns, and Dick smoothly and adroitly ran the rapids without incident. Dick had done an excellent job!

We arrived at our second set of rapids – again Class II. Dick was right behind me and handled a two-foot drop with proficiency. He certainly was making me proud of him – and he was gaining confidence with each success.

On the next set of rapids, I looked behind me and Dick was not there! I looked ahead, and lo and behold he was already through the rapids! What confidence! He made it without incidence.

I caught up to Dick, and said, “You looked great. Nice maneuvering around those hidden rocks.” His response, “What rocks?” I knew he wasn’t kidding. All I could think of was that innocence is bliss.

Day 3 - 9 miles from 13 Mile Woods to the Bofinger Boat Launch

Day 3 had both new and familiar faces – we were at about 20 paddlers. The sun was bright with a weatherman promise of a hot day.

Within minutes, after our start, an eagle flew overhead, and perched in a tree to view us, as we in return, gawked at it. One paddler pointed out a large eagle nest in a tree in the distance. It appeared to be near treetop, dark and huge.

We later saw a large osprey nest. The size of the eagle and osprey nests appeared to be the same, but whereas the osprey nest was seen with overhanging twigs and grass, and hanging over the river as we passed underneath it, the eagle nest was further into the woods.

This day's section of the river offered a spectacular view of mountains. At one stretch we could see mountains and clouds perfectly reflective on the smooth river surface. It was a beautiful remembrance to behold, and another reminder of the wonder of the beautiful Great North Woods of New Hampshire.

Day 3 ended with a sense of accomplishment and sadness for Dick and me. This would be our last day on the 2004 Androscoggin River Source to the Sea Trek.

Meals and the Republic of Indian Stream

Each day the Trek ended before 2 pm. This left us plenty of time to tour northern New Hampshire.

One evening we went to Colebrook for dinner, about 30 minutes drive from our tent site in Errol. To get to Colebrook we took Route 26 West, crossing through Dixville Notch. Dixville Notch, a town of 12 + registered voters, is famous for being “the first in the nation vote” at its very majestic Balsams Hotel. As one drives over the notch you spot a castle in the middle of the wilderness, fronted by a mirror lake. We have taken our wives the past two years to the Balsams in March, and we thoroughly enjoyed our stay and royal treatment in this very historic and all-inclusive resort. Not only have we skied there, but also we have played golf on its two pristine courses⁸. This resort is a must to see, even if one simply drops by for a quick peek and tour.

⁸ www.thebalsams.com



Figure 4: The Majestic Balsams Hotel in Dixville Notch

We frequently saw moose standing next to the road. One time I thought Dick was going to go through the car roof with his excitement, as he saw a moose when he was talking to his wife on the cell phone. It was hilarious hearing and seeing Dick describe to his wife how close we were to the moose.



Figure 5: Moose are plentiful in the Great North Woods

Pittsburg, NH is on the Vermont/Canadian/NH border. It has a reputation for its “moose ally” and being a snowmobile destination. It took less than an hour to get to Pittsburg from Errol, and we were not disappointed with Pittsburg’s beauty and people.

We ate dinner in a beautiful Pittsburg restaurant where a local resident shared a most interesting heritage story about the Republic of Indian Stream. Learning about Indian Stream was exciting for me, as I knew that Daniel Webster was responsible for settling a dispute on the USA and Canadian boundary lines. However, I never knew this tidbit about how Indian Stream was part of that treaty.

I was so enthralled with the story of the Pittsburg locale, that after my return home I did an Internet search on the Republic of Indian Stream:

“For many years after the American Revolution, this Connecticut Lake region was claimed by both the United States and Canada. The settlers formed their own local government, and about 1829, the section became known as Indian Stream Territory (named after a small stream whose source is in the northern tip of the state). On July 9, 1832, the inhabitants organized the "Republic of Indian Stream," with a written constitution, council, assembly, and courts.

The tiny State existed for three years...when after a dispute with the Canadian authorities the territory was occupied by New Hampshire militia. Incorporated as Pittsburg in 1840, the north and west boundary lines were established in 1841, and by the Ashburton Treaty (1842) the region was awarded to New Hampshire (and the United States).^{9, 10, 11}

Support for the Trek

Volunteers, state and local agencies, foundations, contributions from local sponsors, raffles, and souvenir clothing purchases support the Androscoggin Source to the Sea Canoe and Kayak Trek. The Lincoln Canoe Company of Freeport, Maine, donated a 14-foot Kevlar canoe (see Figure 5) as a major raffle item.

⁹ www.weirs.com/w_times/99archiv/02/11/askdr.html

¹⁰ http://www.wgby.org/edu/source/northforest/pages/history/intro_indian_stream.html,

¹¹ Source: Atlas of American History, 2nd revised edition, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984 p. 132



Figure 6: L-R. Steve Priest, Barbara Barrett, Dick Satter, Chuck Knox

Conclusion

What a privilege to spend three days camping, paddling, and exploring the Great North Woods of New Hampshire. We made new friends, saw moose, eagles, osprey catching fish, learned about the Republic of Indian Stream, and did 30 miles of kayaking, including Class II whitewater.

For information about the Androscoggin River Source to the Sea Trek Schedule, go to **www.androscogginriver.org**. Pre-registration is required so ARWC can plan shuttle vans, and meals (as some of the days meals are provided by local sponsors).

Thank you to Barbara Barrett and Chuck Knox for their courtesies and wonderful hospitality. Their enthusiasm, knowledge, and organizational skills made the Trek experience meaningful and personal.

Steve Priest is a motivational speaker for outdoor “play”. He resides in Bedford, New Hampshire with his wife Catherine. He teaches at Saint Joseph’s College of Maine (Standish, ME).

Steve has authored many short stories describing the friendships, insights, and messages outdoor ‘play’ has initiated, strengthened, and nurtured in his life and those who have ‘played’ with him. Sharing the presence, learning, and humor of outdoor challenges is the mission of Steve’s lectures and stories.

This short story is included in Steve’s book, *Outdoor Enthusiast: Never say: “I wish I had...”*. Contact Steve at steve@outdoorsteve.com or www.outdoorsteve.com

